

# ***Coachella Valley Mountains Conservancy***

## ***Acquisition Priorities***

### ***Adopted March, 2007***

#### **Conservancy's Mission**

The Conservancy's mission is to protect lands with "open-space, wildlife, scenic, environmental, anthropological, cultural, scientific, educational, and recreational resources", including both mountainous lands surrounding the Coachella Valley and, upon approval of the Coachella Valley Multiple Species Habitat Conservation Plan/Natural Communities Conservation Plan (NCCP), "natural community conservation lands" as identified in the NCCP.

With \$36 million allocated to the Conservancy from Proposition 84, the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006, for the "protection and restoration of rivers, lakes and streams, their watersheds and associated land, water, and other natural resources", the Conservancy considered what its acquisition priorities would be in the coming years. Setting priorities helps drive the grant program for acquisitions, the search for funding partners, and coordination with other entities that acquire land for conservation purposes.

#### **Process for Setting Acquisition Priorities**

Conservancy staff sought input from experts regarding cultural resources in our territory. Staff also conducted a workshop with people with expertise regarding biological resources, and utilized the information from the NCCP, to identify priority areas in terms of wildlife resources, emphasizing wildlife movement corridors, ecological process areas, and habitat for "narrow endemics" meaning species whose range is primarily here in the Coachella Valley and whose habitat area is relatively small. Staff also used the NCCP Trails Plan and the County Regional Trails Master Plan to assess acquisitions that might be necessary for recreational trails to be built. Identifying scenic resources is somewhat subjective. Virtually all vacant land has some scenic value; however, only some of the land in the mountains is actually visible from the valley floor, and most of this land is not subject to development threats. Exceptions are noted in the recommended priorities at the end of this document. Staff focused on identifying areas that are part of the major scenic gateways to the Coachella Valley, and where development threats may occur. Staff will, however, continue to monitor the mountainous areas, and if threats arise, priorities can be adjusted.

With the information obtained through the above efforts, staff identified the areas of highest resource value for each category, and noted where high resource values overlap. Staff then evaluated the extent of the development threat to these areas. Areas with higher threats were recommended as having higher acquisition priority. Priority setting is a dynamic process because conditions change over time. Therefore, the priority setting process will be ongoing and priorities may shift over time as the result of new information and changes in conditions.

## **Recommended Acquisition Priorities**

The acquisition priority areas adopted by the Governing Board are:

### ***High priority***

- ♦ San Jacinto Mountains – San Bernardino Mountains Wildlife Movement Corridors (Stubbe Canyon and Whitewater Canyon areas). The area also includes sand transport essential ecological processes and some high quality riparian habitat. The area also includes the Highway 111 scenic gateway area, and trail alignment opportunities.
- ♦ San Bernardino Mountains – Little San Bernardino Mountains Wildlife Movement Corridor (Highway 62 area). The area also contains core habitat for the Little San Bernardino Mountains linanthus. The area also includes the Highway 62 scenic gateway area, and trail alignment opportunities.
- ♦ Mecca Hills/Orocopia Mountains Wilderness areas – Joshua Tree National Park Wildlife Movement Corridors. The area also includes significant desert dry wash woodland. The area also includes the I-10 scenic gateway area.
- ♦ Sand transport areas related to the Indio Hills and associated alluvial fans for the Thousand Palms CVFTL Preserve. Protection of this area also provides trail alignment opportunities.
- ♦ Sand transport for Edom Hill CVFTL Preserve/Area of Critical Environmental Concern (ACEC). The area also contains good habitat for CVFTL, Coachella Valley milkvetch, Coachella valley round-tailed ground squirrel, and Palm Springs pocket mouse.
- ♦ Sand transport for Willow Hole CVFTL Preserve/ACEC (includes Morongo Wash fluvial sand transport and Aeolian sand transport area along and south of the fault dunes. The area also contains good habitat for CVFTL, Coachella Valley milkvetch, Coachella valley round-tailed ground squirrel, and Palm Springs pocket mouse, and the area contains cultural resources. Protection of this area also provides trail alignment opportunities.
- ♦ Whitewater Floodplain Preserve additions near Gene Autry to expand habitat for CVFTL and other species and maintain habitat continuity with anticipated Tribal conservation area in Section 6.
- ♦ Highway 74 Scenic Corridor and nearby areas with wildlife and cultural resources and development potential.
- ♦ Santa Rosa Mountains alluvial fans (and lower slopes in south La Quinta) for bighorn sheep, burrowing owls, bats, and desert dry wash woodland. There are few remaining undisturbed alluvial fans in the Coachella Valley and these have unusual assemblages of desert plant species. The area also has high cultural resource values. A portion of this area also includes the only potential for maintaining public access to Martinez Canyon.
- ♦ Pine Mountain to maintain the scenic integrity of the National Monument and the aesthetic integrity of the Pacific Crest Trail, which passes astride Pine Mountain.

### ***Lower priority***

- ♦ Salt Creek area in Dos Palmas for desert pupfish, Yuma clapper rail, California black rail, and rare natural communities in the Salt Creek drainage, including alkali marsh, mesquite bosque, and desert sink scrub.

- ♦ Palm Canyon watershed area and the Palm Hills area. This area contains cultural resources and scenic resources within the National Monument, as well as habitat values for Peninsular bighorn sheep.
- ♦ Remaining inholdings in the Joshua Hills (Cathton) area. In terms of public access to future State Park facilities and maintaining the quality of the “wilderness” experience in this area, selected acquisitions are needed.
- ♦ Alluvial fans of the Little San Bernardino Mountains, especially northerly of the Indio Hills to help maintain east-west connectivity for species such as desert tortoise and Palm Springs pocket mouse.
- ♦ Selected parcels along the urban boundary of the National Monument to protect cultural resources. These are highly localized areas which require more in depth analysis to determine if a threat exists and what the significance of the cultural resources is.

In addition to an area’s resource values and the extent of the development threat, the Conservancy identified three other factors that could affect a decision whether to acquire a specific parcel in one of the general acquisition priority areas. These are:

1. Availability of other potential acquisition entities. For example, there are several areas where the Friends of the Desert Mountains has funding sources for an ongoing acquisition program. Similarly, the Center for Natural Lands Management pursues acquisitions in specific areas with the Coachella Valley Fringe-toed Lizard mitigation fees. BLM, USFS, the Agua Caliente Band of Cahuilla Indians, and a non-profit organization on behalf of the National Park Service, all have ongoing acquisition programs in various areas. Upon approval of the MSHCP, the Coachella Valley Conservation Commission will have an active acquisition program and will be establishing its own acquisition priorities. To some extent, these various programs may reduce the need for the Conservancy to expend bond funds in certain areas. At the same time, they may also create opportunities for partnership acquisitions to acquire larger or more expensive properties. These would be attractive leveraging opportunities for the use of Conservancy bond funds.
2. Parcel size. Parcel size may also be a factor in that the Conservancy does not, as a rule, take title to property but makes grants to other entities, typically non-profit organizations. Non-profits frequently prefer to acquire larger parcels because of management issues with smaller parcels and economies of scale in their acquisition processes.
3. Special opportunities. Unforeseeable opportunities may arise from time to time, such as tax-defaulted parcels, bargain sale opportunities, and foreclosure sales that may significantly lower the price of a property or simply create a sudden opportunity. Another example is that of a landowner with large holdings, a part of which may be a high priority, while other portions are not. If that landowner is not willing to sell only a portion of his/her holdings in Conservation Areas, it may be appropriate to purchase the entire land holding. The Conservancy’s acquisition program should be flexible enough to respond to these special opportunities.